

# THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

by

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Public administration faces an interesting paradox. Along with comparative government, public law, international law, and political theory, it was one of the fields that shaped the new American Political Science Association a century ago. Today, however, public administration sits in a disciplinary backwater. For the last generation, scholars have sought to save or replace it with fields of study like implementation, public management, and formal bureaucratic theory. The debate, in fact, has developed to the point that “traditional public administration” has become a nearly universal pejorative to criticize an intellectual approach whose time has come—and gone. Over the last century, like some of the other founding subfields of the APSA, public administration has slipped from preeminence. Few of top political science departments offer courses in the field; even fewer train doctoral candidates for research and teaching careers in political science. Many political science departments have simply abandoned the field to stand-alone public policy schools or public administration departments.

Yet as public administration has struggled within the discipline, it has become ever more central to governance. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank played a huge role in managing the Asian economic crisis. European nations found new mechanisms to link their currencies and their economies to produce strong economic growth. Assessments of who is most responsible for balancing the federal budget begin with the Federal Reserve. Management problems within the Internal Revenue Service shook the Clinton administration while analysts worried about how to adapt the Federal Aviation Administration’s aging computer systems to the next century. In the nation’s states and cities, welfare and health care reform became signature programs. Mayors and governors who found ways to make their governments perform found that pragmatism trumped partisanship. Wherever one looks, administrative agencies determine who gets what from government—and how well government works. There is a profound paradox, therefore, in the declining attention that political science has given public administration, just as public administration has never been more important.

But despite the coming of a balanced budget and dramatic administrative reforms, citizen confidence in government is near an historic low. A 1998 Pew Research Center poll found that Americans are more frustrated than angry at government. They want better leadership from elected officials and better performance from government agencies (Pew Research Center, 1998). The problem has become global and administrative reform has become, in the United States and around the world, one of the central strategies to solve it. Indeed, one of the most striking political phenomena of the last fifteen years is the simultaneous emergence in all of the world’s major industrialized democracies, and in many other nations as well, of fundamental efforts at administrative reform.

Public administration, as a subfield within political science, thus finds itself in an interesting position. It is struggling to define its role within the discipline even as governments around the world are looking more to public administration to resolve public performance and citizen

confidence problems. Indeed, one of the most striking features of modern governance is the universal attention that puzzles like devolution, privatization, deregulation, and the public interest receive. In many ways, therefore, the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ought to be prime time for public administration—yet it is not, at least within the broader associations associated with the field.

To be sure, the field has been undergoing a remarkable renaissance within the APSA since the early 1980s. The organized section on public administration is one of political science's largest and most vibrant. But in terms of the field's status within the discipline, the sense within political science about the field's contributions to the "big questions," and the field's foundation in recognized methods, it is clear the public administration has some distance to go.

One way to crack this nut is to ask a different question: Could dissertation advisers, in good conscience, recommend that graduate students make careers in the field. The answer, I believe, is an easy "yes." Job prospects remain very strong as public administration and public policy programs flourish. Everyone has come to realize that government, of any size and at any level, must be run well if citizens are to receive their money's worth. Especially when compared with other fields in political science, dissertation topics abound. Most active scholars in the field have several lifetimes of good research topics they will never get to, while government and its officials produce a never-ending supply of new puzzles. The field offers a chance to put its theoretical hypotheses to an immediate, if sometimes brutal test. Indeed, the connections among research, teaching, and practice are powerful and give the field a lively spark. Few fields in political science, I'd wager, can match this combination.

Approached differently, however, the field has two problems. First, in a discipline seeking to become more scientific, public administration has seemed methodologically to lag behind. It has struggled to engage the broader discipline in dialogue: either to convince political science more generally that research in public administration is probing central questions of broad interest, or to conduct public administration research in ways that the broader field viewed as producing sound conclusions with scientific merit. Second, the field's theoretical work too often seems not to define it. Research tends to lag practice, and some of the most interesting recent ideas in public administration have come from outside the field.

## **Marginal Methods**

Even a casual reading of the APSA's history demonstrates just how central public administration was for its first decades. The association's first president was Frank J. Goodnow, best known for *Politics and Administration* (1900). In his presidential address, he said that the APSA ought to devote itself to three big questions: "the expression of the State will," "the context of the State will as expressed," and "the execution of the State will." Indeed, Goodnow believed that administration ought to be the preeminent focus for the new association. APSA, he argued, ought to focus on helping government achieve "what is best attainable" (1905, p. 46). Public administration gave voice to the new association and leadership to its early activities. Indeed, five of APSA's first eleven presidents were from the public administration subfield.

Especially after World War II, however, the subfield and the broader discipline became increasingly estranged. Both sides of the relationship contributed to the problems. Focused, as

Goodnow prescribed, on helping government be all that it can be, public administration has long been *prescriptive*. Since Woodrow Wilson's "The Study of Administration" (1887), its work has had a heavy normative character. How *should* government administer its programs? How much power should be put in the national government, and how much devolved to the states? Should government be organized by function, area, process, or client? Moreover, public administration has long been grounded in eternal, unanswerable conundrums. What should be the balance between centralization and decentralization? How can we devise an accountability system that gives operating officials enough discretion to do their jobs without having elected officials lose control over key policy decisions? And who will watch those who watch, to keep them honest and accountable? (Juvenal worried about this problem—in ancient Roman times.)

Political science has long been impatient with public administration, a field grounded in the search for clear, convincing, prescriptive solutions to problems that rarely have good answers (and few answers remain good for long). Implementation research has sought to shift the focus from agency behavior to program results. Bureaucratic politics focused on explaining the behavior of key agency officials instead of its structure. Public management has struggled to find the sources of leverage on government's outcomes instead of designing its processes. And economic theories of bureaucracy have simply swept away the century's detritus and replaced it with simple assumptions of self-interest and deductive models of the results these assumptions produce. For a field grounded in structures and processes, it has become harder to defend answers when so many scholars have decided that the questions are no longer interesting or important.

While public administration has labored in the search for prescriptions, political science increasingly has sought *predictions*. What are the repeating patterns of political life? How will voters vote, or judges decide? What motivations will drive the behavior of bureaucrats or elected officials? Public administration's prescriptions flow from a textured understanding of the rich complexity of administration. Political science's predictions build on an effort to simplify the analysis, find the driving assumptions and critical variables, and build replicable knowledge. Indeed, the rising importance of economic and rational models is an effort to boil down explanation to its central forces. Public administration, meanwhile, has long built on complexity and explored conundrums. Theory in public administration has tended to deductive approaches, while political science has moved more to induction, which requires stripping complex behavior down to its core components. As political science has struggled to win respect for itself among social sciences—especially economics—by moving toward ever more-abstract analysis, public administration has been faced with a governmental world that has, if anything, become more complex. It is little wonder, therefore, that the marriage is under strain.

There are very hopeful signs that these struggles are shifting, however. Some public administration scholars have sought to integrate administration with formal theory, on formal theory's own turf. Some public administration scholars have used network approaches to advance organization theory and to link it with other social sciences. Other scholars have moved far past the "it's complicated!" explanation in which implementation research was trapped for a decade. More broadly, skilled scholars have woven together the bureaucratic politics, implementation, public choice, and traditional public administration approaches into fresh and useful syntheses. From the other side, the political science discipline has come to understand—if

sometimes grudgingly and never universally—the centrality of administration. Administrative reform has become a critical touchstone for comparative politics. Notions of civic engagement have linked public administration to political theory. International relations and political economy increasingly hinge on the behavior of interesting administrative mechanisms like the International Monetary Fund. And any careful understanding of American institutions is increasingly informed by the role of federalism and bureaucracy. Meanwhile, public administrationists have devoted themselves to becoming major institutional players within APSA again.

It would be an exaggeration to say that public administration has returned to the central role it enjoyed at the founding of the APSA. But it is also clear that the subfield has become ever more central to the puzzles driving modern political science: in part because its scholars have consciously sought to speak in the language that the rest of the discipline understands, and in part because the rest of the discipline has come to understand better that it ignores administration at its intellectual peril.

### **Leading or Following**

If public administration is winning increasing respect within the academic community, however, it faces a growing problem in meeting Goodnow's founding goal of improving practice. Many critics charge that, in the self-conscious search for greater academic respect, public administration's ability to speak truth to power has diminished. When Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower looked for ways to improve the management of the United States governments, they turned to public administrationists. When Presidents Nixon and Reagan sought reform, they turned to private sector managers. In charting the "reinvention" of government, Vice President Al Gore looked to a journalist, a former city manager, state government officials, and an army of federal bureaucrats. The reinventers were quite explicit about *not* turning to academics. Government reformers have often looked *outside* political science—and outside public administration to private management—for answers to government management problems.

Does public administration have anything to say in this debate? If not, does this mean that public administration has gradually changed its stripes over the last century? If so, why has its voice been only dimly heard? In part, the answer lies in an enormous growth industry: consultants and private-sector reformers who have generated piles of ideas to help hard-pressed private-sector managers cope with accelerating marketplace challenges. Indeed, many of these ideas—from total quality management and downsizing to customer service and reengineering—have proven attractive concepts and at least marginally useful in transforming private companies. Hard-pressed public officials have looked for help wherever they can find it. Coupled with a widespread, cynical sense that market competition is invariably superior to government management, these private-sector reforms have driven much government change.

There are hopeful signs: Congress and executive-branch agencies has increasingly been turning to organizations like the National Academy of Public Administration and to some scholars for advice. At the state and local levels, universities have worked hard to provide more useful counsel and to train their students more effectively to tackle public problems. But there remains a large gap between the literature of political science and the answers that practitioners seek from it—a gap between the theory and the world it seeks to model.

All has not gone smoothly in the effort to acquire ideas from private-sector experts. Bright ideas of private-sector consultants have rarely worked smoothly (and sometimes not at all) in private companies. Government, however, has often embraced major ideas like Planning-Programming-Budgeting Systems and massive downsizing/reengineering just as their warts have emerged in private companies. Moreover, learning what works—and why—has rarely shaped the idea transfer. Public-sector reformers have often borrowed the ideas in caricature. They have embraced privatization on the assumption that market competition is good, while forgetting that everything really interesting in microeconomics comes in the textbook after the initial chapters on the basic virtues of markets. They have reengineered public organizations by shrinking the workforce and eliminating middle managers—but they miss the reengineer’s argument that a careful definition of an organization’s mission must come first, followed by a study of how to focus the organization on the needs of its customers, then by how to lead the organization in change. Half-baked recipes applied out of context and then followed half-heartedly, not surprisingly, tend to produce unsatisfying results. They also produce demand for the next round of half-baked, ill-focused, half-hearted reforms.

Even when they seek to understand private sector reforms more carefully, public sector managers have often failed to ask how well private reforms fit the public sector. For example, everyone knows that private organizations have sought improvements by focusing on their customers. Some public sector managers have mindlessly followed suit. There are, of course, very useful applications of the model. Public organizations involved in direct service delivery, like drivers’ license bureaus and social security offices, could do a much better job in treating citizens with courtesy and care—and some government agencies have become models for the approach. In the public sector, however, there are often multiple “customers” with conflicting expectations, from partners in service delivery (such as federal, state, and local governments, as well as private contractors and nonprofit organizations) to elected officials with their critical concern about accountability. Even the word “customer” gets in the way of specifying just how public managers can behave more responsively—and what “responsive” administration means in a democratic government. The rich complexity of the “customer” idea has not been thought through by many of those advocating it for the public sector.

Thus, public administration has found its agenda slipping from its control. Eager, anxious public officials have sought quick solutions wherever they can find them, and those solutions have been easiest to grab in the private sector. At the same time, public administrationists—preoccupied with regaining their place in the discipline by producing more-scientific work or entrapped in old hierarchical- and authority-based models that fit new government problems poorly—have failed to engage the cutting-edge issues. So government reformers have looked instead to journalists, consultants, private management gurus, other nations, and even to each other.

Public administration, of course, does have important things to say to public officials. Public administration has a rich theory and an even richer tradition analyzing what is truly *public* about government management, and this is the piece most prominently missing from the public reform debate. It has a deep understanding of the tensions between policy making and administration. It has a sense of the subtle influences that shape a public organization’s environment. It

understands that organizational structure and administrative process matter. In short, public administration is at its best at explaining (and shaping) the management of public programs, in a direction determined by public organizations, in the public interest.

If public administration has important things to say, however, it has too often failed to say it clearly. Too much of the work in the field is not well informed by the problems with which today's public managers are struggling. The management of intergovernmental programs, contracts, loans, and regulations has not received attention proportionate to government's growing reliance on them. Government managers are groping their way along trying to redesign their financial and personnel systems without the intellectual support they need. A troubling thought is that public managers fail to listen to what public administration has to say because it does not speak in a language they hear. Moreover, what they do hear might too often seem an answer to yesterday's problems instead of the new issues on their desks today.

This is an argument for better theory. It is also an argument for shaping research questions by listening more carefully to public administrators and the problems to which they most need answers. Indeed, many researchers are struck by the gap between the published literature—often aimed at resolving issues defined in previous research—and the dilemmas facing practicing managers—sometimes new, often connected only slightly to the driving puzzles of earlier published research. What will it profit the field to gain theoretical purity at the cost of answers that matter to no one? One of the best reasons to do empirical work in public administration, in fact, is not because of the answers it produces but because of the questions it defines. Public administration has much to say. What it needs today is thinking harder about what we most need to know. That, in turn, offers great potential for cementing the subfield's theoretical contributions.

### **Public Administration's Rich Future**

Theoretical work in public administration is messy, contentious—and exciting. Few fields in political science can match the sheer vitality of research in public administration today. This isn't to say, however, that the subfield can rest. Too much of the research is derivative: sometimes shaped by mindless formalism, in an effort to be more scientific, instead of careful specification of formal models that produce useful insights; and sometimes borrowed too much from private sector reforms, in an effort to be relevant, instead of defined by that which is truly *public*.

Public managers today are developing new problems faster than public administration is developing an understanding of them. The subfield does not have to respond by being trendy. But if theory is to have real bite, the subfield must be theorizing about the problems that matter, and those problems are rapidly evolving. In attacking these issues, however, public administration has an important gift: a keen sense, grounded in a century of work within the discipline and centuries past of rich thinking, of the enduring problems and important themes. The key to redefining public administration's future lies in shaping the future by building on this past, and in recognizing that the critical linkage is a keen diagnostic sense of the new twists that fresh problems present. Understanding administrative coordination today must include the wholesale interconnectedness of the public and private sectors, and of federal, state, and local governments. Understanding administrative effectiveness today must incorporate new approaches to making large and complex bureaucratic organizations more responsive to citizens

and their needs. Understanding administrative accountability today must build on charting the new relationships among elected officials and the administrators who implement the programs they create.

As public administration has sought respect within the discipline, it has risked distancing itself too much from practice. That matters not only because most of the subfield's members were been drawn to public administration by the excitement of real people tackling real problems. It also matters because it too often has weakened our ability to understanding the questions that most need answering. That, in turn, has weakened public administration's theoretical development. Theory without the ability to predict and understand something real and important is not worth doing; theory well-grounded in questions central to government officials and scholars alike is inescapably lively and exciting. The keystone to public administration's rich future lies in solid social science, grounded in enduring puzzles, that help provide answers to the future's problems.

What implications does this picture suggest? One is that public administration has become *more*, not less important, both to governance and to political science. Government, in the United States and around the world, hinges more centrally on administration than ever before. Moreover, public confidence in political institutions depends increasingly on their ability to perform. Making political science without adding public administration is like making bricks without straw.

Another is that public administration will be impoverished to the degree to which it is backward looking. It is tempting to seek to rebuild public administration on the greatness of its past. Indeed, one of the field's great is the eternal nature of its fundamental questions. The key, however, lies in understanding that the problems with which today's government administrators are wrestling are categorically different from many of the problems earlier theories charted. The interconnections among the public, private, and nonprofit sector are unprecedented. So too is the increasing globalization of public policy. Faced with these tough challenges, administrators are blazing their trail through a thick forest with few guides. Their paths—the issues with which they are grappling and the solutions they are finding—offer valuable clues for the future of public administration research. Making public administration and the study of governance forward looking requires grounding it in the field's ageless questions; using the new problems administrators face to define new theoretical puzzles; and learning from the successes and failures of administrators to chart the field's empirical research. That requires using practice to inform theory—asking the questions that most need to be answered, and identifying the answers that are most persuasive.

It would be hard to find theoretical puzzles more lively or important. The theoretical and practical challenges demand political science's best minds. Political science will be poorer if they do not invest in the intellectual challenges that public administration presents.

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